
EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN THROUGH EDUCATION: MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS

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Abstract: Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) was one of the first great feminist writers. She wrote in various genres history, novels, travel, even a children's book but is best known for her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The title clearly echoes that of Thomas Paine's clarion call for social justice and liberty, *Rights of Man*. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy. In it, Wollstonecraft argues that women ought to have an education commensurate with their position in society and then proceeds to redefine that position, claiming that women are essential to the nation because they educate their children and because they could be 'companions' to their husbands rather than mere wives. Instead of viewing women as ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage, Wollstonecraft maintains that they are human beings deserving of the same fundamental rights as men.

Through this paper I want to stress out the issue that still lay in the ways of women through Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, an eighteenth century feminist writer. The system of education which Wollstonecraft insisted to be changed still prevails. We are in the twenty-first century yet facing subjection mentally and physically. Though women had attained the rights to learn equally with men, the calling of woman as 'bossy' and man as a 'leader' and criticizing woman like 'unladylike' by men who have been brought up with the superiority over the other gender has to be changed.

Key words: Education, Emancipation, Feminism, Subjection,

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects (1792), written by the eighteenth-century British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, is one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy. In it, Wollstonecraft responds to those educational and political theorists of the eighteenth century who did not believe women should have an education. She argues that women ought to have an education commensurate with their position in society, claiming that women are essential to the nation because they educate their children and because they could be companions to their husbands, rather than mere wives. Instead of viewing women as ornaments to society or property to be traded in marriage, Wollstonecraft maintains that they are human beings deserving of the same fundamental rights as men.

Wollstonecraft was prompted to write the *Rights of Woman* after reading Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord's 1791 report to the French National Assembly, which stated that women should only receive a domestic education; she used her commentary on this specific event to launch a broad attack against sexual double standards and to indict men for encouraging women to indulge in excessive emotion. Wollstonecraft wrote the *Rights of Woman* hurriedly to respond directly to ongoing events.

While Wollstonecraft does call for equality between the sexes in particular areas of life, such as morality, she does not explicitly state that men and women are equal. Her ambiguous statements regarding the equality of the sexes have since made it difficult to

classify Wollstonecraft as a modern feminist, particularly since the word and the concept were unavailable to her. The *Rights of Woman* was actually well received when it was first published in 1792.

Wollstonecraft maintained counter to the assumption of many people at the time that women only appeared intellectually inferior to men because they did not receive as good an education, and she emphasized how much women could contribute to society depends upon how far they were allowed to educate themselves. She wrote: "Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship, instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers - in a word, better citizens" (89).

During Wollstonecraft's time women were devoid of rights. In the eyes of the law, a married woman had no property, no vote, no money of her own, nor any rights to her children. By the eighteenth century the feudal state of 'coverture' was enshrined as common law. It regarded a husband and wife as a single entity, but all rights belonged to the husband. While single, or widowed women could own money, property and run businesses, married women had no equivalent right without pursuing expensive legal settlements. It was not until the Married Woman's Property Act of 1870, and subsequent legislation, that married women were allowed to keep money they earned directly and have ownership of property acquired before or after marriage.

University education was also denied to women, who could thus not pursue professional careers. It was not

discovered until after her death that the army surgeon James Barry was in fact a woman, the Irish-born Margaret Bulkley. She was disguised as a boy from the age of ten, and passed her whole adult life as a man, studying at medical school in Edinburgh and qualifying as a doctor in 1812 and as a surgeon in 1813. It would be another century before Eleanor Davies-Colley became the first recognized woman surgeon in 1911.

In 1865, Elizabeth Garrett found a loophole to take the examination for the Society of Apothecaries. Despite many obstacles, she qualified as a doctor, though the Society rapidly closed the loophole. In 1869 Emily Davies established Girton College, the first university college for women, relocated to Cambridge in 1873. The London School of Medicine for Women was founded in 1874, chiefly through the determination of Sophia Jex-Blake who had been frustrated at her attempts to gain a medical education. London University was the first to award women degrees on the same terms as men in 1878.

The 1870 Education Act allowed women to vote and serve on School Boards, and the 1894 Local Government Act allowed married women the right to vote and sit on municipal councils. In 1919 the Sex Disqualifications (Removals) Act allowed women, including married women, to hold certain professional posts. The first woman magistrate, Ada Summers, was sworn in on 31 December 1919; the first woman barrister, Helena Normanton, took up her practice in 1922, as did the first woman solicitor, Carrie Morrison.

In the twelfth chapter of the *Rights of Woman*, "On National Education" Wollstonecraft put forth her views on education. She firmly believes that the government should create some sort of public school system where children from all walks of life come together and learn. She would turn out to be pretty right-on about this, because what she's describing here is a blueprint for our modern school system. Wollstonecraft doesn't approve of private schools because by their very nature, they teach children to think of themselves as different from the children who can't afford to go. She also doesn't approve of homeschooling, since the absence of other children leads the student to think that she or he is the most important person in the world.

One thing that Wollstonecraft thinks is horrible for society is the fear of change and innovation. She constantly mourns the fact that schools still teach children to memorize and nothing else. What can we possibly expect of kids when school is nothing more than a contest where the prize goes to the best memorizer? Wollstonecraft takes an opportunity here to jab at Catholicism, saying that this religion is based completely on groundless authority. Protestantism, she says, is based on the idea that anyone can read

the Bible and judge for themselves what it says. Wollstonecraft says that we are living in a culture where everyone's goal is to rise one class above the other.

Many people might argue that social inequality is a good thing because it allows the most talented people to thrive. But Wollstonecraft is certain that there's no point in sacrificing the majority in order to produce a select group of brilliant people. Family life and early education isn't necessarily bad. It can be used to create compassionate and brilliant people. It just needs to have the right mix of independent thinking and social responsibility.

Wollstonecraft says that we are wasting time in getting kids to recite formulas and historical events that they do not understand. A true public school system would focus on the *how* of knowing and not the *what*. Unfortunately, society is just filled with a bunch of parents who want their kids to get gold stars and to beat the other kids. To them Wollstonecraft says, 'Knowledge isn't the priority'. This scenario is getting worst as parents nowadays insist their children not only being top in the class but also want them to be a super singer or to win the title of little Prabhu Deva, participating in all reality shows.

Wollstonecraft brings to limelight about the rights of women by saying that all of the awful things about the current education system affect girls worse than boys. She comes with a really radical suggestion. She thinks that boys and girls should attend the same schools. Wollstonecraft is convinced that the only way to create equality and respect between men and women is to socialize them together from a young age. Educating women differently couldn't possibly have a bad effect on them, since in Wollstonecraft's mind, there's no possible way anyone could make them weaker than their current education already does. Wollstonecraft thinks that educating boys and girls together would also have the added benefit of creating early marriages. She tends to think that the earlier two people get married, the better.

Wollstonecraft insisted that women must learn self-respect, and they can only learn self-respect by learning to think for themselves. Then they won't spend their lives using seduction and other tricks to get men to give them what they want. Wollstonecraft wants punishments in the school system to work the same way that punishment for adults does. Any time a student does something wrong, they will have to be put on trial in front of a jury made up of other students.

Wollstonecraft wants stronger laws preventing cruelty to animals, because it's this same cruelty that leads many young people to become cruel adults, too. Humanity to animals should be particularly taught as a part of national education. That said, she has known women who loved their dogs very much and

barely paid attention to their children. In order to be good people, both genders have to act according to the same moral principles. There shouldn't one set for boys and one for girls. This forms the pivotal note which she modulates through her writings. She says, Judgment can be acquired only by reflection, affection only by the discharge of duties, and humanity only by the exercise of compassion to every living creature. (98) Thus she argues that all children should be sent to a 'country day school' as well as given some education at home 'to inspire a love of home and domestic pleasures'. She also maintains that schooling should be co-educational, arguing that men and women, whose marriages are 'the cement of society', should be 'educated after the same model'. She says,

I have had in view throughout—that to improve both sexes they ought, not only in private families, but in

public schools, to be educated together. If marriage be the cement of society, mankind should all be educated after the same model. (96)

Wollstonecraft believes that not only does society need to educate women and help them become more rational, but it also needs to stop insulting women who do manage to show a little reason. Wollstonecraft herself got called as a 'hyena in petticoats' by a politician named Horace Walpole because he thought her style of argumentation was 'unladylike'. Even today, an opinionated and assertive woman might get called 'bossy' for doing stuff that would get a man lauded as being 'a leader'. I want to stress that the education system which Wollstonecraft wants to be changed still prevails in the society and perceiving women with different perspective and subjection of women has to be changed.

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